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Musgrave, Cannon, Cubin: Hard, black gold

Abundant oil shale a way out of woes

By Reps. Marilyn Musgrave, Chris Cannon And Barbara Cubin
April 30, 2005

A recent national poll found that 91 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "When it comes to energy, we need an America that relies on its own ingenuity and innovation - not the Saudi royal family." Most Americans know the harsh reality that the U.S. relies on a steady stream of imports to fuel the domestic economy. But what most Americans do not know is that our Western states could have enough oil to keep America running for years, even at current consumption levels.

A recent report on "Energy and National Security" issued by Sandia National Laboratories found that our nation's national security is threatened by the continued reliance on vast quantities of oil from unstable foreign sources. However, the report offers a promising recommendation energy experts have overlooked for too long - investing in alternative production sources including oil shale.

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Oil shale, when heated, is a rock that releases a liquid that can be processed into oil.

Americans looked at Rocky Mountain oil shale 30 years ago as a contingency source of fuel, to be tapped only in dire emergency. Though long-term forecasts suggest that we might soon reach such an emergency, oil shale is now an economically viable source of oil, as well as a strategically important domestic fuel source that can help reduce our reliance on foreign oil.

The U.S. House approved an energy bill last week recognizing the strategic importance of oil shale and directing the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to develop and move forward in less than three years with a commercial leasing program for federal lands.

Of the estimated 2.7 trillion barrels of oil held in the world's oil shale deposits, 2 trillion is scattered across the United States. That's more oil than all the countries in the Middle East combined.

When the oil shale industry started in western Colorado three decades ago, technologies to recover oil shale were not economically viable.

Since that time, independent producers and large companies have spent millions on field research for new development processes.

One independent producer from Utah has invented his own extraction process from equipment and ideas the large oil companies had abandoned.

He estimates that he will be able to produce 1,000 barrels of crude oil a day for about \$13 a barrel - a highly competitive price.

What some may consider even better than these advances in profitable production are the environmental advances. Originally, processing oil shale required mining, transporting and then heating the shale to release the oil. A new and promising process allows producers to pump the liquid oil from the ground with minimal

surface disturbance.

Nationally, the richest and most easily recoverable deposits are currently found in the 16,500 square miles of the Green River Formation. This resource base is believed to be capable of eventually producing 10 million barrels a day for more than 100 years. The U.S. Department of the Interior owns more than 80 percent of this area, comprising the Piceance Creek Basin in northwestern Colorado; the Uinta Basin in eastern Utah; and the Green River and Washakie basins in southwestern Wyoming. It is estimated that in Colorado alone, the total resource approaches 1 trillion barrels of oil, almost four times as much oil as Saudi Arabia's proved oil reserves.

This could allow the U.S. to become the world's single biggest oil source, ahead of all the OPEC members. The Department of Energy's Office of Naval Petroleum and Oil Shale Reserves estimates oil shale's direct economic value to the nation might approach \$1 trillion by 2020, not counting other equally or more valuable strategic and national security benefits that may not be fully measured in dollars.

In November 2004, the Interior's Bureau of Land Management called for public comment on the terms to be included in leases for oil research and development in the three states. Currently, the BLM is analyzing the comments and a decision is forthcoming. However, we need more than research and development leases; we need to issue commercial leases.

The Congressional Western Caucus, an organization of nearly 60 members of Congress from the West, recognizes the need to start developing the nation's undiscovered domestic oil and free our dependence on foreign sources for present and future generations. We are pleased that the House-passed energy bill moves oil shale forward as a viable opportunity for reducing reliance on foreign oil.

Rep. Marilyn Musgrave represents Colorado's 4th Congressional District, Rep. Chris Cannon represents Utah's 3rd Congressional District and Rep. Barbara Cubin is Wyoming's only member of the U. S. House of Representatives. All are Republicans.

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